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ABSTRACT

As current scholarship in composition is becoming increasingly influenced by post-structuralist theories of discourse, two approaches to teaching freshman composition compete with one another. At the heart of the controversy lies the question of the place of academic discourse in this pedagogy. The social constructionist approach (supported by David Bartholomae) focuses on academic writing as the real work of the academy, finding that the most "empowered" writers are those who can take authority with their relation to the past by interacting with other texts. The expressivist approach (supported by Peter Elbow) focuses on classrooms where students can clear out a space for themselves and "own" their work, a classroom where students can be free from the institution. The difficulty for the composition teacher is to reconcile what is appealing about both views, as a review of current composition theorists demonstrates. Introducing the terms of the conflict and the politics surrounding the teaching of academic discourse to students in the writing classroom allows students themselves to explore solutions out in the open. Without expecting students to develop an expertise in theory, the issues at stake can be introduced and students can be asked to consider how they imagine their own "selves" and the relation of those selves to language and the community. (NH)

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Constructive/Constructing Dialogue: Students, Teachers and the "Self" in the Writing Classroom

Current scholarship in composition is becoming increasing influenced by post-structuralist theories of discourse. As applied to the business of the writing classroom, such perspectives work from more decentered, socially contextual conceptions of the "identity" or "self" of the writer than those which, fequently associated with an emphasis on personal writing, maintain a more romantic focus on the student as an independent, atomic individual. One of the primary sites at which such different approaches confront one another is the discussion on the place of academic discourse in our pedagogy.

This paper begins, appropriately enough, with another CCCC session, from the 1991 conference on the other coast, in Boston. This Crosscurrent session, titled "Writing in School: A Dialogue on Academic Discourse," featured David Bartholomae and Peter Elbow in dialogue on the proper role of academic discourse in composition classes in general, and especially freshman composition. Attending this session proved serendipitous for me, for it helped me to define the problems I had been facing in my own teaching for some time, and to begin to name the primary issues at stake. It inspired one of those rare but wonderful occasions when I have found myself using the paper which I dutifully carry with me at these conferences not just for note taking, but for an active dialogue of my own, on paper, which responded to the ideas of the speakers and continued the discussion into areas more specific to my own experience and concerns. These notes mark an important moment in the development of my interest

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in the connections between composition theory and critical theory at the site of the subject that writes, and how this theory makes its way into our pedagogy.

At the Boston Crosscurrent session (and I am working directly from my notes here), David Bartholomae represented the position that as academic writing is the real work of the academy, it is better that it be done out in the open than under wraps. He argued (as he has elsewhere) against the belief in classrooms where students can clear out a space for themselves and "own" their work as if a writing classroom can be an institutional space free from the institution. Bartholomae made the point that this myth of the "frontier classroom" is a particularly American impulse which articulates a desire to be free of from the past and to finesse differences between people. He also argued that we never relinquish authority to the degree that we claim to, and that there is no writing that is "writing without teachers." He maintained that the most "empowered" writers are those who can take authority with their relation to the past be interacting with other texts--those who feel confident in their right to join in the conversation.

Peter Elbow, on the other hand, began by stating that both roles--that of the writer and that of the academic--should be offered to students. But if he had to choose between the two, he would choose the role of the writer in the classroom. He stated that he places more emphasis on writing than on reading in his classroom because reading is so much at the center of other classes, and readers and writers have a conflict over who gets to determine the meaning of the text. Readers sometimes want to kill off the writer, but writers have an interest in staying alive--an interest in ownership and trying to interest the reader in what is on their minds. He argued that allowing students to write for themselves, even if

it means they take themselves too seriously, is a necessary step in the development of confident writing voices.

As my own teaching experience has involved a move from an English department which strongly favored the first approach to one oriented more toward the second, I have been struggling for some time to reconcile what is appealing about both views and begin to define where I might enter into this conversation. What troubles me the most, however, about our ways of understanding and speaking of academic discourse, and expressivist as opposed to political, social constructionist pedagogy, is the either/or, one versus the other character that such discussions inevitably seem to take on. In the above example Bartholomae and Elbow both resisted references to this event as a debate, and made an effort to breakdown, or bridge dichotomous ways of thinking about the work of the classroom (although Elbow has recently presented a provocative case for reevaluating and celebrating the potential of binary thinking at our fall conference at UNH, entitled this year, "The Writing Process: Retrospect and Prospect"). As in his essay "Reflections on Academic Discourse," Peter Elbow acknowledged the obvious reasons that academic discourse is a necessary part of freshman English. David Bartholomae also agreed that we need to offer various roles to students so that they can gain a sense of authorship, adding that he would probably like to be a student in Elbow's class. He qualified this statement, however, by asking why his department should be responsible for propagating a lie, for "replicating the American myth that we can start new outside cultural tradition." Composition, he said, should be a part of the critique of humanism and not a reproducer of its mistakes. Thus this discussion and other scholarly work on this subject still seem to come down to a binary oppostion, an either/ proposition. Rhetorically, this makes sense; it provides a logical structure--one we often teach--for

disputation and persuasion. But at the same time the poststructuralist theory that informs much of this work should also keep us wary of easy dichotomies. And finally, I'm concerned with how our ways of translating theory into pedagogy can best serve our students.

I agree that the most "empowered" writers are those who can take authority with their relation to the past by interacting with other texts and feel confident of their right to join in the conversation. I agree with David Bartholomae that it is dishonest to replicate the American myth that we can start fresh outside of cultural tradition. And yet, I am also concerned about those students--especially women, and other students whose voices and experience have been denied or marginalized by this cultural tradition--who may need time to develop confidence in their own voices, and may not feel "empowered" to do so if they feel that they must always compete with the voices of others. Sometimes it *is* important to write for self discovery. But what do we understand this to mean--"self discovery"--and how do we talk about this in a social context--from the classroom, to the university, to the (as our students would have it) "real world" beyond ? Perhaps the fundamental problem raised by this apparent conflict lies in defining how we construct our notion of "the writer," how we imagine the "self" of the writing student to be constructed in discourse.

While I support those who would resist use of the terms expressivist and social constructionist to create falsely dichotomous categories, I will begin with these categories as they have been represented. Expressivist pedagogy tends to represent the writer as an atomic individual, autonomously generating ideas into discourse. Some would object that this is a gross over-simplification. Stephen Fishman, for example, has recently argued that expressivists do not "have a naive view of the writer

as independent, as possessing innate abilities to discover truth" (648). He defends Peter Elbow's work, in particular, noting that Elbow's "emphasis on believing . . . is rooted in a romanticism that seeks not isolation but new ways to identify with one another, and thereby, new grounds for social communion" (654). And yet I still find in the work of Elbow and others a way of speaking about writers that assumes the presence of an essential, core self, whose uniqueness can be represented in discourse when the writer discovers his or her "authentic voice." The social constructionist position would argue that if there is such a core self, we cannot separate it from ideology and the discourse communities which shape our experience.

Unlike the "current traditional" pedagogical model rejected by the process movement from which both these approaches descended, a social constructionist perspective supports teaching academic discourse not because it is "the" proper language of the academy, or the way to "Truth," but because it is the language of the academy as a discourse community. As Bartholomae writes:

> Every time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion--invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history or anthopology or economics or English. The student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community (134).

I read Bartholomae's choice of language here--that the student "has to"--as not so much an endorsement of any superior instrinsic value attached to academic disourse as it is a statement of the way things are, *and* an indication that knowledge of and experience with this discourse is a necessary precondition to productive resistance. Bartholomae's

reference to Barthes' "famous paradox"--that "a writer does not write . . . but is, himself, written by the languages available to him" (143), illustrates the claim of contemporary critical theory that the author, as an individual, ceases to exist in the words on the page. Foucault's notion of "subject positions" and composition scholarship on the role of discourse communities relocate authority from the individual to social and historical discourse practices. Informed by such theory, composition teachers can best serve students by foregrounding the social nature of knowledge and discourse conventions both in and out of the academy. Such theory leaves us with the practical question, however, of how we are to imagine these subject positions and the individuals who occupy them. On one level, Bartholomae's statement that, "Leading students to believe that they are responsible for something new or original, unless they understand what those words mean with regard to writing, is a dangerous and counterproductive practice" (143), should provide writers and teachers of writing with a sense of relief. But on another, more immediate level, such knowledge may also be disorienting and debilitating.

In *Textual Carnivals*, perhaps the strongest poststructuralist analysis of the field of composition to date, Susan Miller critiques process pedagogy for stressing "a self-referential subjectivity" which leaves its students in "an infantile and solipsistic relation to the results of writing" beyond the classroom (100). While the work of those who teach discourse as a social construction would appear to repond directly to this problem, Miller even takes issue with "scholars like Patricia Bizzell and David Bartholomae, who appear to embrace deconstructive theories," for openly "supporting academic discourse in a depoliticized, social and material context where analyses of power are disconnected from writing" (111).

While I disagree with Miller's claim that most teachers have taught

process for its own sake, I do share Miller's concern with courses which focus exclusively on personal writing, *for its own sake*. A writing class which is centered around writing for "self-discovery" without grounding that "discovery" in an informed sense of the world without which it is impossible to conceive of that self, and a sense of how the language available for framing this discovery comes from this world, is a self-referential learning situation. The essay which, for example, tells the tale of how the writer began the year with a person he or she feared to be the roommate from hell, but later learned not to judge a book by its cover, rarely turns into anything more than an excercise. I do have my students write expressively from personal experience--this is an important part of learning how to bring the "private" voice into a more public space--but I do so in connection with a reading I have assigned, or an issue we have discussed in class, so that students remain conscious of other voices, other ways of engaging discourse to render experience.

Unfortunately Miller completes her critique without, I would argue, fully considering how her proposal for a new "subject" of composition is to be implemented in an actual freshman writing course with students who bring their own history of writing experiences with them. Her manner of jumping ahead to the results of writing amounts to a virtual focus on product, despite her claims to the contrary, and worse yet, her lack of tolerance of the traditional humanist notions of the "self" of the writer that students bring to class with them--whether in relation to expressivist writing or learning academic discourse--runs the very real danger of leaving students with a sense of nihilism or hopelessness--not an attitude very conducive to encouraging "results."

Miller dismisses any concerns with the student writer's "voice," remarking that this notion of "personal voice . . . speaks to no one in

particular, in no particular settings, and to no particular purposes." It is "developed to be 'heard' only among a peer group" (103). If students come to freshman composition, as many do, with negative ideas about writing or fears of their inadequacy to express themselves, how can we expect to help them develop confidence in their ability to work with language if we don't allow them to feel that they have a voice? How can we possibly expect to help students out of submissive subject positions and on to positions as agents through writing if we do not begin by giving them a supportive audience and encouraging them to take risks?

As John Clifford points out, "good" students, in a current-traditional context, are already "decentered" in relation to academic writing. They have learned that the formal elements of the written product count for so much "that the discursive shell matters more than the ideas inside. As a result, the status of the 'I' that writes the essay is so decentered, so alienated from actual experience that many students have as much emotional identification with their school writing as they do with geometry" (48). Women, as studies such as *Women's Ways of Knowing* explain, may feel alienated by the discourse of the university which denies a place for a more personal voice. Students from discourse communities other than white and middle class may also feel alienated, as Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* suggests. But as she looks to expose and foreground the politics of this in the classroom, Miller ignores the ways in which process pedagogy can allow for a broaching of matters of power and authority in writing by allowing experimentation with and discussion of the choices writers make and the reasons for those choices. Granting student writing status as texts can also mean addressing the contexts in which, and the purposes for which, texts are produced. At the very least, temporary naivite and solipsism are more productive and easier to

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overcome over time than a sense of powerlessness--and for the students such conditions are certainly more humane.

John Clifford factors in these students in his effort to reconcile postmodern theory with the work of the classroom:

> Students want to become writers not because they have mastered syntax but because they are convinced they have something to say and, more important, somebody to say it to. They want an audience they can trust, one that encourages (even expects) them to interrogate dominant values as part of their composing process, to look carefully at the social contingencies of family, religion, gender, and class that have shaped their unique histories. . . Instructors can help students become inquisitive writers by avoiding rigid rules, constant evaluation, and an obsession with socializing students into the conventions of "normal" academic writing. They can, instead, develop interactive writing workshops imbued with a sense of the writing process as multifaceted, evolving, and exploratory. Readings that foreground the ideological and cultural also encourage the critical consciousness necessary for committed writing (46-7).

Most importantly, perhaps, he adds that "Without the awareness of ıdiological struggle that comes from trying to intervene into academic conversations, students remain confused about the purpose of composition studies" (47)

While some may be uncomfortable with this idea, I do agree that we need to introduce our students to post-structuralist perceptions of the overdetermined nature of discourse and the writing subject. Making such ideas relevant and accessible to students would move them away from the notion of that words refer to settled meanings and fixed intentions (Miller 114); considering the connections of discourse with history and structures of power could help them produce the kind of writing that Miller argues it is our job to teach--writing that has results, that can effect consequences

in specific situations. By working with readings and gradually introducing assignments which ask the students to question their assumptions about language and the making of meaning--in much the same way that social-constructivist pedagogies already do--we can begin to help students construct written products which actively engage them with structures of power. A gradual, intertextual introduction to the relation of discourse to ideology could encourage students to investigate, not a self-referential subjectivity, but the broader notion of subject positions.

That said, I'd like to suggest, paradoxically, that encouraging students to develop the critical consciousness necessary to recognize and productively engage cultural values may best be accomplished by first recognizing the personal--that which we feel most acutely in our experience, what allows us to function. In *Personal Knowledge*, Michael Polanyi proposes that the solution is belief--what he calls the "fiduciary programme" (an idea Peter Elbow builds on in "The Doubting Game and the Believing Game"). According to Polanyi:

> "Every acceptance of authority is qualified by some measure of reaction to it or even against it. Submission to a consensus is always accompanied to some extent by the imposition of one's views on the consensus to which we submit. Every time we use a word in speaking and writing we both comply with usage and at the same time somewhat modify a little the existing usage; . . . On the other hand, even the sharpest dissent still operates by partial submission to existing consensus" (208).

Here Polanyi sounds a lot like Bakhtin, whose dialogic theory of discourse many of us, particularly feminists, have found invaluable as a means of retaining the possibility of personal voice while acknowedging the social nature of discourse. Bakhtin, I believe, quite accurately characterizes the kind of movement that most of us hope to see in our students writing.

According to Bakhtin, human coming to consciousness is a process of constant struggle between externally authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse which "is half-ours and half someone elses" (345). This process of coming to the internally persuasive word--accompanied, I would add, by an understanding of *the self as in process* within cultural and historical structures--creates a context for "self discovery" which avoids the problems of essentialized subjectivity.

In a recent essay in *College English*, Laurie Finke suggests that this notion of the self as always in process also involves teachers in a special, way as "Both teachers and students are, at least in part, constituted by the dominant discourses and practices they oppose and seek to demystify" (9). Finke suggests that as antithetical as psychoanalysis and feminist pedagogy may seem, psychoanalytic theory may offer a way of understanding why "efforts by both feminist and radical teachers to promote nonauthoritarian classroom environments have often ended up mystifying the very forms of authority they sought to exorcise, authority that is both institutionally and psychically embedded in the social relations of education" (7). A Lacanian understanding of the self as "always in the process of being fashioned" and therefore "always simultaneously a product *and* producer of the symbolic economy" suggests, Finke argues, that teaching "not only engages the unconscious, but is implicated in the very formation of the unconscious itself" (15, 16)

This weighty claim helps me to make sense of something that has happened in my teaching that has probably happened to most of us. Since I have been teaching literature the past two years I have had the experience of "repeat" students. Two young women from the American Lit. class I taught last semester are currently in the Writing About Literature course I am teaching this semester. In conference, when we were discussing their

topics for their first paper in this course, both of them said something to the effect that they weren't worried because they "pretty-much know what I want in a paper"--and when I raised my eyebrows one added, "well you know what I mean." When we work hard to encourage our women students to have confidence in their own voices, such remarks are rather depressing. But they also honestly reveal the way students have internalized the power structure of the academy, and the fact that there are clearly certain things that we expect from our students; if we were honest, as Finke suggests, we would also recognize that we have a particular kind of voice in mind when we encourage students to fashion their own voices.

Hence Lester Faigley notes the confusion present in most talk of empowerment. Even "The freedom students are given in some classes to choose and adapt autobiographical assignments hides the fact that these same students will be judged by the teacher's unstated cultural definitions of the self" (410). Faigley concludes that:

> No matter how well we teach our students, we cannot confer power as an essential quality of their makeup. We can, however, teach our students to analyze cultural definitions of the self, to understand how historically these definitions are created in discourse, and to recognize how definitions of the self are involved in the configuration of relations of power (411).

Lillian Bridwell-Bowle's discussion of her teaching in "Discourse and Diversity: Experimental Writing in the Academy" also suggests that knowledge of the conventions of academic discourse is a necessary prior step to writing a "diverse discourse" that critiques them.

In much the same way that Gerald Graff calls for making disagreements in the field of literature part of what is studied, I believe that it could be

productive and enlightening to introduce the terms of this discussion, and the politics surrounding the teaching of academic discourse, with the students themselves and explore solutions out in the open in the writing classroom. Without expecting our students to develop any expertise in theory, we can introduce the issues at stake and ask the students to consider how they imagine their own "selves" and the relation of those selves to language and community. Next fall, I plan to teach a course in which students will do just this. In this course, a post freshman writing course (501) which I have tentatively titled "Constructions of the Self: Reading and Writing Autobiography," my students and I will read and write autobiography in a critical social context. The course description, which is still in process, currently reads as follows:

Autobiography entails not only the notion of chronicling events from one's life and reflecting on those events, but also a sense of making public a private self. What is involved in presenting the personal and individual to a potentially diverse public audience? How does writing autobiography, and even autobiographic fiction, entail constructing a self with a view to how others might read that self? Even in journal writing we can be said to construct ourselves in the act of putting our reflections down on paper, and in this act we also have some kind of audience in mind, however tacitly defined. Such considerations necessarily become magnified by the decision to write for a wider audience.

What is not always explicitely discussed is how that same writing self has also been socially constructed, shaped by considerations of class, race and gender, the various communities in which he of she participates, and cultural ideology in general. Thus another part of what this course will attend to, as we read and write in response to a variety of examples of autobiography and autobiographical fiction, and write our own narrative

and reflective essays, is how such factors figure into the selves we write, and the very act of writing the self. Finally, given current theoretical attention to the importance of deconstructing romantic images of an autonomous, essentially independent self, how might we write the self that still asks to be written, that certainly *feels* private and individual, while still acknowledging the social-situatedness of our identity? We write about our lives for a variety of reasons, but always, in one way or another, to tell our stories. How might the considerations described above come into play in our motives for writing, and the nature of the stories we tell?

Ironically, just as I have noticed that the increasing impact of theory in the field has been followed by an increasing interest in and acceptance of professional writing conducted in a personal voice, my interest in applying theory in the classroom has brought me to an interest in personal writing. As I plan to do some of the writing along with my students, teaching this course will be risky for me. From about High School on I became accustomed to fighting off feelings of voiceless by learning to negotiate whatever discourse I found intimidating, not just appropriating it but making it mine on some level, and finding validation in this--proving (to myself above all) that I could do it. Not encouraged to engage in it, personal writing made me self conscious. It felt too self-indulgent, too revealing, and a-contextual--I had no way of answering the question of "will anyone understand this?" In fact trying to explain this makes me a bit uncomfortable. I can only hope that Lillian Bridwell Bowles is right--that "Perhaps with time, poststructuralist revolutions in thinking about our culture will influence our language so much that we will come to see personal writing, . . . writing that contains emotion, writing that closes the gap between subject and object, . . . and all the other

possibilities yet to come as having equal status with carefully reasoned, rational argument (352-3). But I think, for now, being upfront about my own anxieties about the writing and sharing of reflective autobiographical pieces will help us develop a community of writers in this class and encourage those students who would resist the theory I may introduce to experiment with a step in that direction. I feel that it is important for writers to develop a consciousness of what it is that we mean when we speak of "our stories," of what is involved in writing that can be said to represents a "self" through personally meaningful, internally persuasive discourse. Such a consciousness can only encourage the development of voices that will be heard.

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